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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001492

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: CESAREAN SECTION FOR PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION?

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A key Phalange party member sees the election of a March 14 candidate as Lebanon's next president as the only way to put a definitive end to Syrian influence, which extends throughout Lebanon's security apparatus. Assassinations of March 14 MPs will continue, he predicted, but the September 19 attack on Antoine Ghanem, a close personal friend, had the effect of unifying March 14 parliamentarians who had strayed toward the opposition. He also noted rising Christian tensions, criticized French policy toward Syria, and urged the international community to step up efforts to establish the Special Tribunal. End summary.

MARCH 14 CANDIDATE ONLY WAY TO REMOVE SYRIAN INFLUENCE

2. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and FSN Political Advisor met with Michel Mecattaf, head of the regional offices of the Phalange party and son-in-law of former President (and current -- undeclared -- presidential contender) Amine Gemayel on September 26. Mecattaf called the presidential election an extremely important turning point for Lebanon in terms of Syrian influence and other critical issues, including the need to counter Hizballah's rising "satellite" state and Lebanon's ability to attract foreign investment. It is critical, he stressed, that the next president be a March 14 candidate, even if we need to pull one out by "Cesarean section", in order to eliminate Syria's interference in Lebanon once and for all.

3. (S) Mecattaf said March 14 strongly opposes a constitutional amendment to allow Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman to become president. The LAF intelligence has a network of 7,000 informants; unless there is a change at the top, he argued, these operatives will not be effective in preventing further political assassination. The next president and cabinet must conduct a major reshuffle in the structure of the security services, including Sleiman, if Lebanon is to get out from under Syrian influence.

¶4. (S) Syria is behind all of the political assassinations in Lebanon, he stated, and the killers are always one step ahead of Lebanese security service. This also explains why we are hopeless at conducting investigations, or even sealing off crime scenes, he admitted, adding that Lebanon is the only country where bystanders run to the scene of the attack rather than fleeing, like normal people. (Note: At a recent dinner hosted by the Ambassador, UNIIIC Commissioner Serge Brammertz, who arrived on the scene 48 hours after the September 19 assassination of March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem, decried the GOL's inability to protect crime scenes and evidence at them. End note.)

¶5. (S) Mecattaf was convinced someone in the LAF must have had prior knowledge of the September 19 attack on March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem. He said he had tried to convince Ghanem, a close personal friend, to return to Lebanon only for the October 25 parliamentary session, then immediately depart, and had even bought him tickets, but Ghanem had refused, saying he was tired of living abroad and wanted to be with his family and live his life. He reportedly told Mecattaf that he couldn't stay locked up at home all the time, because he wasn't someone important like Saad Hariri, who everyone would come to see; he had to get out if he wanted to see people.

¶6. (S) Mecattaf had spoken with Ghanem by phone the morning of the assassination and said Ghanem's meeting in Sin el-Fil (the East Beirut Christian suburb where the attack occurred) had been scheduled at the last minute, 20 minutes before the meeting took place. The meeting lasted about 45 minutes, and Ghanem was killed immediately afterwards. The killers, he said, had obviously been following him and somehow had been able to get the bomb in place during that one hour time frame.

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ASSASSINATIONS WON'T DESTROY MARCH 14

¶7. (S) Mecattaf feared for March 14 MP Robert Ghanem's security next. Ghanem, viewed by some as a possible consensus candidate, could be the next target precisely because Syria doesn't really want a consensus candidate, he reasoned. He hoped that Ghanem was taking extra precaution. (Note: The Ambassador, passing by Robert Ghanem's house recently, noticed a marked buildup in security, even more than that outside the house of Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt, considered by the opposition to be the March 14 leader most opposed to a consensus candidate. End note.)

¶8. (C) In any case, Mecattaf argued, the assassinations aren't succeeding in dividing March 14. Though he admitted that, following the June 13 assassination of March 14 MP Walid Eido, Tripoli bloc MP Mohamed Safadi and others had distanced their support, following the recent Antoine Ghanem assassination they are now firmly back on board with March 14.

¶9. (C) Mecattaf said March 14 did not consider parliament to have been convened on September 25, since enough MPs did not show up to hold the first round of voting, despite Speaker Nabih Berri's claims to the contrary. Based on this interpretation, March 14 retains the right to elect its candidate by absolute majority during the last ten days of the two-month electoral period if a president is not elected before then.

TENSIONS RISING AMONG CHRISTIANS

¶10. (C) Tensions among Christians also are rising, Mecattaf warned. Phalange supporters in the past two days reportedly

attacked Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) offices and supporters in three different village in the Batroun and Metn districts.

CHIRAC STILL A PLAYER ON LEBANON?

¶11. (C) Criticizing France's policy toward Syria, Mecattaf lamented the time wasted with FM Kouchner's mediation efforts and said France should stop sending him to meet with Syrian officials. During a recent trip to Paris, Mecattaf met with former President Jacques Chirac, whom he said is in regular contact with Kouchner, reportedly providing advice on Lebanon and Syria to the Sarkozy government.

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL KEY TO STABILITY

¶12. (C) Finally, Mecattaf stressed that kicking off the Special Tribunal is key to ensuring Lebanon's stability. He urged the international community to move faster on establishing the Tribunal. Pol/Econ Chief noted that the U.S. was ready to make its contribution to the Tribunal budget as soon as the GOL had done so. (Note: Lebanon transferred its \$5 million contribution the same day. End note.)

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Mecattaf, obviously, prefers his father-in-law and party leader Amine Gemayel as Lebanon's next president. Gemayel, though he has not yet formally announced his candidacy, recently struck a deal with Berri to postpone the election for one month to allow more time for discussions on a consensus candidate. Gemayel clearly expects to be that candidate (unrealistically, in our view, though clearly he has been charmed by Berri into taking the apple). Mecattaf's call for a "Cesarean section" election and the fact he does not consider parliament to have been officially convened on September 25 suggest that, in his view, March 14 intends to use an absolute majority vote if that is the only way to safely delivery its candidate.

¶14. (C) March 8's call for a consensus candidate is really

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nothing more than a euphemism for opposing a March 14 candidate, whose ranks include Gemayel, Robert Ghanem, Boutros Harb and Nassib Lahoud. The opposition views a March 14 president as an existential threat to Lebanon's Shia (given March 14 insistence that Hizballah's arms be brought under state control) as well as to Syria (due to March 14's support for the Special Tribunal).

¶15. (S) Mecattaf's warning on Robert Ghanem is alarming. Ghanem is probably the least anti-Syrian of the March 14 candidates (though he did side with March 14 on establishing the Special Tribunal). Because of that, he has been widely viewed as one of the front-runner consensus candidates. Killing Ghanem would be a very clear sign proving the hypothesis pitched by many of our contacts that March 8 will not be satisfied just in blocking a March 14 candidate. March 8, in this analysis, also wants to eliminate reasonable compromise choices in favor of dictating who can be Lebanon's next president.

FELTMAN